
Pro Rege

Volume 9 | Number 3

Article 6

March 1981

Reply to Plantinga

Nick Van Til
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Van Til, Nick (1981) "Reply to Plantinga," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 9: No. 3, 30 - 32.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol9/iss3/6

This Response or Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Christians are or ought to be limited to a vacuous theism, perhaps because it is all "rational arguments" can establish.

Now perhaps Van Til did not mean to leave this impression. In any event, just to set the record straight, let me say clearly as I can what I do believe here. In the first place, I don't for a moment think Christians need "rational argument" to establish the fundamental tenets of Christianity; in *God and Other Minds* I argued that belief in God is entirely right, proper, rational and appropriate even though none of the proposed rational arguments succeeds. And in "Is Belief in God Rational?" (in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Delaney, 1979) I claimed that "the mature believer, the mature theist, does not typically accept belief in God tentatively, or until something better comes along, nor, I think, does he accept it as a conclusion from other things he believes; he accepts it as basic The mature theist *commits* himself to belief in God; this means that he accepts belief in God as basic" (p. 27). Secondly, I follow Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck and the majority of Reformed thinkers in holding that belief in God *ought not* to be accepted on the basis of rational argument. As for "vacuous

theism," furthermore, I wouldn't dream of suggesting that Christians are or ought to be limited to such a thing. On the contrary; what I accept here and what I think Reformed Christians ought to accept is to be found in, say, the *Heidelberg Catechism*. And the fundamental tenets of Christianity to be found there, are to be established not by rational argument, but by appeal to the scriptures, wherein God speaks to us, revealing these and other truths. Of course I do think that serious thought and rigorous argument are useful to the Christian community; they are useful in exploring and expanding our understanding of the truths of Christianity and in defending them against the many sorts of attacks mounted against them. But here, I hope, Van Til and I are in agreement.

Van Til should be relieved to hear that I do not hold anything like the views he attributes to me. But how could he have thought I held them? Could it be that he didn't bother to read *God and Other Minds*, preferring instead to rely on brief comments in weekly news magazines for his information about it?

Alvin Plantinga

Reply to Plantinga

As some of the *Pro Rege* readers know, for several years Alvin Plantinga has devoted his ample capacities as a logician to a review and discussion of speculative theology or what may be called the rational arguments for the existence of God. In 1964 he contributed to *Faith and Philosophy* an article entitled "Necessary Being," which is the concern of one of the "Five Ways" of Thomas Aquinas. In 1965 Plantinga edited *The Ontological Argument* which

reviews the subject from its original statement by Anselm down to the present.

In his Oct. 29, 1980 *Pro Rege* letter, Plantinga refers to his 1967 publication, *God and Other Minds*. There he reviews the cosmological, the ontological, and the teleological arguments and finds them ineffective. He looks at the problem of evil and shows, as I referred to it also, that logic is not on the side of the "atheologist's" claim that the

presence of evil is inconsistent with the Christian's claim that God is good. In that work Plantinga ends his discussion of "God and Analogy" with these words:

Hence my tentative conclusion: if my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so, therefore, is the latter. (p. 271)

In my September 1980 *Pro Rege* review, I said in assessment, "I am not sure that Plantinga would want to claim that analogy 'is the way believers know God.'" The quote within the quote was Mr. Richard Ostling's. I went on to dispute the use of analogy, as if Plantinga finds it in some way useful. Plantinga argues that in so doing I completely misrepresented him.

I plead guilty to a lesser charge. Admittedly, I should have collated the ideas in *God and Other Minds* with some of Plantinga's later writings. For example in *God, Freedom and Evil* he again has a chapter entitled "The Ontological Argument." In the last section of that chapter under the heading "The Argument Triumphant" Plantinga concludes that on the basis of its premises the argument is sound but he warns, "An argument for God's existence may be *sound*, after all, without in any useful sense proving God's existence" (p. 112). By not useful, I take it, Plantinga means that it can in no way serve as a foundation for one's Christian faith.

From there I should have moved on to the 1979 article which Plantinga refers to, i.e., his article "Is Belief in God Rational?" in *Rationality and Religious Belief*. According to Plantinga that writing finds me completely mistaken in my interpretation of his earlier works. But here I demur. Plantinga writes:

It is worth noting by way of con-

clusion, that the mature believer, the mature theist, does not typically accept belief in God tentatively, or hypothetically, or until something better comes along. Nor, I think, does he accept it as a conclusion from other things he believes, he accepts it as basic, as a part of the foundations of his noetic structure. The mature theist *commits* himself to belief in God; this means that he accepts belief in God as basic. Our present inquiry suggests that there is nothing contrary to reason or irrational in so doing. (p. 27)

In the above qualifier the word "mature" successfully excludes Plantinga from any suggestion that his religious faith is based on rational arguments or that he subscribes to a "vacuous theism," a charge which he extrapolated from my discussion of the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix. But "mature" does create problems. By implication, I think, we can assume that some other kinds of believers and theists, perhaps less mature, can find some use for the rational arguments. It is my belief that when one talks about some kind of deity, as to existence or nature, rationalistically, then one is not talking about the God of the Scriptures, or as Pascal said, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So then to speak of "mature" is to allow for some other kind of possibility as to the foundations for one's noetic structure. Isn't it the other way around? Mature Christians from time to time may take account of the intellectual arguments and then invariably come to the conclusion that they did not come to their belief by that route.

I would add here that to talk about the existence of God without talking about His nature can also be no more than an intellectual exercise which does not touch on the God of

Christianity. The Bible does not question God's existence, but does have much to say about what God is to His covenant people. To say *that* God is without saying *what* God is is like trying to carry tails of a coin in one's pocket as coin of the realm without taking along heads.

Plantinga argues, and somewhat vociferously I think, that I am completely wrong in implying from the *Time* article that his limiting suppositions concerning God are based on logic rather than on the Word of God. The *Time* article states that Plantinga "argues that even an all-powerful God cannot create a world in which mayors can choose to take bribes and that also contains no evil" (*Time*, 7 April, 1980, p. 68). Taken out of context, the passage I think lends itself as well to the construction I put on it as it does to Plantinga's more recent disclaimer.

When I look for the context of the "mayor" quote then it seems to me it has to be Plantinga's discussion in his book *The Nature of Necessity*. There in a chapter entitled "God, Evil and the Metaphysics of Evil" (pp. 164 ff.), the discussion is carried forward with suppositions and counter-suppositions and their implications as to possible

worlds and possible gods in relation to Curly Smith, a fictitious mayor of Boston. The conclusions are drawn on the basis of what the premises allow. The premises are not scriptural "givens" but hypotheticals posed for the sake of the discussion, the concern of which is not biblical theology but speculative theology. Without implying that this kind of discussion and its premises are the basis for Plantinga's Christian beliefs, I think one can say that the method resembles that of the scholastics.

Finally, even if some of Plantinga's meanings have escaped me, the suggestion that my "Modernizing the Case for God" "needs a lot more work" has not. Let me reverse the compliment. I believe that Plantinga has pretty well covered the range of intellectual arguments and with unprecedented thoroughness. Had he accompanied that work with the kind of forthright statement as to the foundations of his noetic structure which he did in his letter, I think there would have been no possibility of misconstruing his meaning. For his clarification we are in his debt.

Nick Van Til